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ABSTRACT

This paper describes briefly the path of political socialization research over the past 40 years; discusses "Project Citizen," a civics program for adolescent students, and the implications of recent research on it; and comments on the current state of political socialization research. Contains 12 references. (BT)

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POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION OF YOUTH: RECONSIDERATION OF RESEARCH ON THE CIVIC DEVELOPMENT OF ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES AND ABROAD

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During the 1960's and 1970's, research about the political socialization of children and adolescents was trendy among political scientists and civic educators, who used it to inform decisions about curriculum development and instruction in schools. As a young man, I was part of this trend – initially as a graduate student and later as a new member of the Indiana University faculty. For example, in 1967 the National Council for the Social Studies published my first monograph, *Political Socialization of American Youth: Implications for Secondary School Social Studies*.

My 1967 monograph was a review of the research literature on political socialization. The main point of my work was expressed in this paragraph from Chapter One of the monograph.

> The development of good citizenship (variously interpreted) remains the most frequently cited basic objective of civics and government teaching. Political socialization research can contribute to the achievement of this objective by helping to identify the norms that define good citizenship in American culture, the means for transmitting these norms, the relative effectiveness of these means, and the extent to which actual behavior conforms to stated values. Thus, the study of political socialization can contribute to the improvement of secondary school civics and government instruction by enriching our knowledge of what American youth believe about politics, of the extent to which these beliefs correspond to American political norms, of the contributions of formal political education to political socialization, and of the possible strategies for the

improvement of political socialization through social studies education. (Patrick 1967, 5.)

The political socialization research reviewed in my monograph was used to inform the development of a new high social government program, *American Political Behavior (APB)*, written by me and Howard Mehlinger, which Ginn and Company published initially in 1972. The APB textbook and accompanying instructional materials were quite popular during the early to mid-1970's. During the late 1970's, the 1980's, and early 1990's, however, use of the APB program decreased gradually but significantly, as did the conduct of political socialization research. My final political socialization publication in this period, for example, was a chapter in a 1977 work published by the Free Press, *Handbook of Political Socialization Research.*

Reasons for the decline of political socialization research were various and pertain both to socio-political circumstances as well as scholarly critiques about methodological and substantive shortcomings. The very idea of political socialization research seemed irrelevant to the "hot-button" issues and concerns of a society less interested in developing common civic identity than in nurturing diverse multicultural commitments. Further, scholars noted the lack of conceptual or theoretical integrity in the field of political socialization research, which appeared increasingly to consist of discrete "one-shot" studies about narrow and disconnected topics (Conover and Searing 2000, 91-94).

By the beginning of the 1990's, naysayers dismissed political socialization research as a dying field of inquiry. By the mid-1990's, however, striking signs of new life were noted by Richard Niemi and Mary Hepburn in a journal article titled, "The Rebirth of Political Socialization." On cue, several important publications appeared during the later half of the

1990's, which reported exciting new research about political socialization of youth in the United States and abroad (Hahn 1998; Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry 1996; Niemi and Chapman 1999; Niemi and Junn 1998; Torney-Purta, Schwille, and Amadeo 1999; Yates and Youniss 1999).

I, too, have joined the recent outpouring of political socialization research which often, these days, uses other labels, such as research on civic development or civic competence. My latest work has been done with Thomas Vontz and Kim Metcalf of Indiana University and is titled *Project Citizen and the Civic Development of Adolescent Students in Indiana, Latvia, and Lithuania*. This monograph reports the instructional impact of an issue-centered civic education program, *Project Citizen*, on the civic knowledge, civic skills, and civic dispositions of students in three countries.

Project Citizen is an instructional product for adolescent students, which was developed and published in 1992 by the Center for Civic Education at Calabasas, California. Since then, it has become very popular. Today, *Project Citizen* is used by teachers and their students in all 50 states of the United States of America and more than 30 countries in different regions of the world. *Project Citizen* involves students in the selection and investigation of important public issues in their community. They work cooperatively to propose, justify, and defend resolution of the issues. Thus, *Project Citizen* engages students in learning experiences designed to affect positively their civic development, which involves basic components of democratic citizenship: civic knowledge, intellectual skills, participatory skills, and civic dispositions. Is *Project Citizen* an effective means to the civic development of students? The findings of our research indicated that a well-designed instructional program such as *Project Citizen*, if used adeptly by teachers, can enhance the civic development or civic competence of students in the United States and other

countries.

As indicated by our recent Indiana University research project and other prominent inquiries of the 1990's, the recent and ongoing political socialization research has been linked to the global resurgence of democracy and democratic citizenship education during the 1990's. Unlike most of the earlier political socialization research, this current wave of inquiry tends to be comparative and international. It also tends to be tightly conceptualized in terms of democratic political theory. Thus, it can help us to know the extent to which young people in various cultural contexts and nation-states are or are not learning what democracy is and how to act competently and responsibly as democratic citizens (Hahn 1998; Torney-Purta, Schwille, and Amadeo 1999). Further, it can inform educators about the strengths and weaknesses of instructional treatments in terms of their effectiveness in developing among students the knowledge, skills, and disposition of citizenship in a democracy.

Recent research emphatically shows that particular kinds of civic education in schools can have a strong impact on the civic knowledge and skills of students (Niemi and Junn 1998, 17-18). For example, research by me and my Indiana University colleagues revealed that *Project Citizen* had statistically significant and positive effects on students' knowledge of democracy, self-perceived civic skills, and one civic disposition: propensity to participate in civic and political life. These positive instructional effects of *Project Citizen* were not dependent upon the political unit – Indiana, Latvia, or Lithuania – in which the instructional treatment was experienced; that is, the program appeared to be equally effective across the three political units of this study (Vontz, Metcalf, and Patrick 2000, 125-144).

This research also pinpointed certain strengths or weaknesses of the instructional

treatment, *Project Citizen*, and different methods of using it by teachers. For example, the student's self-perceived level of participation or involvement in *Project Citizen* was strongly related to gains in civic development. If teachers encouraged students to select the community issues they investigated, they tended to achieve higher levels of civic development. And students who attempted to implement in the community their proposed resolution to a public issue tended to achieve higher levels of civic development. On the negative side, *Project Citizen* was found to be deficient in its effects on certain civic dispositions, such as political tolerance and commitment to constitutionalism. It appears that the program could be improved by teaching more systematically, deeply, and emphatically about concepts connected to particular civic dispositions.

In conclusion, political socialization research by whatever name (e.g., civic development, civic competence) is once more on the rise in tandem with the worldwide resurgence of democracy and freedom. Educators and political leaders in post-communist countries, for example, are eager to find research-based warrants for particular methods and content in education for democratic citizenship. Thus a domain of inquiry with which I was involved closely at the beginning of my scholarly career looms large for me near the end of this career. I find this prospect invigorating and challenging – a stimulus to continuing engagement with educational research that can make a difference in the civic development of students.

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